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ABSTRACT

To question how she constructed an earlier idea about the role resistance takes in peer tutoring, a college professor examined the literature review she had prepared for the first chapter of her doctoral dissertation. In the literature review, the professor intended to establish an interpretive lens to comment about an African-American woman's experience of peer tutoring in a writing center. The argument constructed in the dissertation explored how peer tutoring helps students establish their authority as writers. Answers to such questions as what scholars and types of scholarship were privileged in the review and what the choice of "the literature" suggests about the research design of the dissertation reside in the multidisciplinary approach tentatively taken in the review of the literature. (Contains 16 references.) (RS)

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Constructing Knowledge about Resistance in Peer Tutoring: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Multicultural Contexts

In a preconvention workshop sponsored by the National Writing Center's Association at this CCCC's, Nancy Grimm of The Writing Center Journal described what she believes are the directions of future writing center scholarship. She thinks that at base such scholarship will complicate our ways of thinking about peer tutoring and question not only the traditional approaches to research, but also our common sense approaches. We will share the struggles and tensions inherent in our research and writing center observations and thus acknowledge the complicated enterprise of describing what happens when writers collaborate.

This paper was written in this spirit of new scholarship.

Introduction: The Context of this Paper

I recently completed a full draft of my dissertation in which I explore how peer tutoring helps students establish their authority as writers. I believe, of course, that peer tutoring is a unique--and for some perhaps the only--opportunity to converse freely about writing and to negotiate for a place within academia. But there are moments in my text and my argument when I am unsure; moments which may have at first appeared wonderfully assertive and certain (because they HAD to be) but which today I find myself doubting. One such moment is in my review of literature where I lay the groundwork for my later analysis of the role resistance takes in peer tutoring, a resistance which I observed in my case.

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Today I'd like to do something rather dangerous for both myself and the broader community of researchers in peer tutoring: I'd like to question how I constructed my idea about resistance by reading the portion of my review of literature from the first chapter of my dissertation. In this segment, I am trying to establish an interpretive lens through which I go on to say something interesting about an African-American woman's experience of peer tutoring. As I read, I'd like to question how we as researchers construct interpretive lenses.

Resistance

Henry Giroux in Theory and Resistance in Education: A Pedagogy for the Opposition, argues that

> . . . central to analyzing any act of resistance would be a concern with uncovering the degree to which it speaks to a form of refusal that highlights, either implicitly or explicitly, the need to struggle against the social nexus of domination and submission . . . resistance [has] a revealing function, one that contains a critique of domination and provides theoretical opportunities for self-reflection and for struggle . . . (108-09).

Analyzing resistance, Giroux points out, uncovers a deeper refusal on the part of students to be dominated. Through his interpretation of Giroux, Geoffrey Chase argues that the term "resistance refers to a student's refusal to learn in those cases in which the refusal grows out of a larger sense of the individual's relationship to liberation" (15). Both are suggesting, in other words, that a student's resistance reveals her struggle against domination, and her refusal to learn in cases when she feels she must submit to learning. A student could be

resisting the domination of the university which requires her to follow certain conventions in her writing. By extension, then, a student could be resistant to the fact that she must submit not only to a writing course, but also to peer tutoring.

More conventional explanations of resistance, however, concentrate on the explicit behavior of the student. Studies of resistance within the teaching of writing explain the nature of resistant dialogues as indications of the need for students to learn the academic patterns of conversation. Anne Ruggles Gere and Ralph Stevens, for example, assert that the breakdown in peer conversation, particularly in groups, can result from "verbal squabbles" about issues that don't pertain to the paper at hand. Such bickering is characterized by "lifeless language," and routine and formulaic responses that might "lapse into personal [verbal] abuse" (98). John Roderick acknowledges that one-to-one conferences can entail contention, but attributes it to specific issues having to do with pragmatic concerns (misspellings, not knowing how to brainstorm), and the individual development of the tutee (measured by the student's motivation and the level of her talk about writing). These studies represent scholarship that concentrates on the difficulties of student writers that are attributable to difficulties in conversation, individual maturity, or learning styles.

In explaining how conversation between peers can break down, Gary A. Olson delves deeper into the broader sources of resistance. He describes cases where students may come to the writing center hostile, indifferent, or diffident. He discusses the reasons for these attitudes that can lead to unsuccessful tutoring, citing in particular the collision of administrators', teachers', and students' faulty assumptions about the nature of peer tutoring. Emily Meyer and Louise Z. Smith in their textbook The Practical Tutor, also note the

specific situations from which student "anxiety, frustration, and anger" can arise (14).

To complicate matters further, educational anthropologists have fought to dispel the myth that students themselves are responsible for their own difficulties or that their problems are the result of the immediate situation of the classroom or conference. William Labov has revealed the faulty assumptions underlying what is called "the myth of cultural deprivation" which posits that students, such as African-American females, have been deprived of the "culture" which would allow them to succeed. John Ogbu argues instead that students are "unconsciously taught . . . ambivalent attitudes about education and success in adult life or in the opportunity structure" (Ogbu 332). Along these lines, William Ryan warns against "blaming the victim" for her belligerence or uncooperativeness. A student may be ambivalent regarding her own status, and thus she may be quick to blame herself for her troubles. But many scholars argue that these students are reacting to a larger context.

Marilyn Cooper in "The Ecology of Writing" establishes this broader perspective when she assesses a writer's developing expertise. She writes:

> . . . Language and texts are not simply the means by which individuals discover and communicate information, but are essentially social activities, dependent on social structures and processes . . . (366)

By extension, then, examining a student's resistance to tutoring should not be limited by an analysis of her experiences with tutoring only. A student's language and her texts are indications of "social activities," of a "social nexus," to borrow Giroux's term. Cooper adds at the close of her essay, "Whenever individual and group purposes cannot be negotiated someone is shut out; differences in status, or power, or intimacy curtail inter ersonal

interactions" (373). She is suggesting that descriptions of a student's writing development should account for that student's placement in a "system." This "ecology" includes the student's life both inside and outside of the academy. Therefore, a student's experiences as a writer result from the complicated interactions or negotiations she has with those who have had or presently have power over her. In addition, a student's "difference"--for example, that she is African American and female--is part of that ecology and cannot be separated from her development as a writer.

In discussing that broader context or ecology of "difference," Glenda E. Gill posits that "people in marginalized groups repeatedly find themselves alone in the college classroom . . . Most [Caucasian] students are lonely, but they have more outlets, generally, at predominantly white institutions, to feel that they belong. Socially, academically, and in terms of family expectations, [the African-American student] is a 'student under pressure,'" (226). According to Angeletta Gourdine, African-American women may feel pressured to conform and deny their own identities. She writes: "Evolving in opposition to dominant ideals and values, American African culture is in constant conflict with 'accepted ways of thinking' that govern academic institutions" (139). This means that oppositional behavior--hostility, resentment, anger--is not indicative of (again quoting from John Ogbu) "a different language or dialect, a different cognitive style, a different style of interaction, a different communication style, or a different style of socialization or upbringing" (Ogbu 334). Instead it indicates a student's belonging to a segment of society which has been traditionally marginalized in education. When the student does establish her desire to continue her schooling, it can be at the sacrifice of her cultural identity. The marginalized student's

resistance is perhaps, as Jacqueline Jones Royster argues, a result of no one encouraging her to perceive her education as important ("Looking From the Margins").

A student's gender is also a mark of "difference" in some educational environments and another source of resistance. A woman may be pitted against the dominant group in the classroom where women often occupy roles and positions of relative powerlessness in relation to men, a powerlessness that manifests itself through their interactions with others. For example, within classroom discussions, women generally speak infrequently, and when they do, they say less than their male counterparts who may often interrupt them. In uncomfortable situations in general, "females tend to withdraw from unpleasant interactions and participate less" (Baird, 181-82). This means that when faced with the unpleasant situation in a classroom setting or a tutorial, a female student, despite the fact her teacher or tutor may be female, may withdraw. As Carolyn Heilbrun suggests, the student may feel it is unwise to bite the hand that feeds her: "Deliberately or not, women are raised to be untroublesome, and to many women, young and old, it seems profoundly boorish to question the nice gentlemen who have let them into their university" (36).

Resistance on this interpretation indicates a student's mistrust of the academy resulting in her apparent difficulty with the conventions of academic discourse. A complicated form of resentment and struggle, silence springs from the power play between on the one hand an authority figure who represents the dominant and typically male perspective of the institution, and on the other hand the student who represents the perspective of a silenced female searching for her voice. Dale Spender explains:

> Both sexes bring to the classroom the understanding that it is males who should

> "have the floor" and females who should be dutiful and attentive listeners . . . Female silence is exploited by educational institutions and contributes to the over-representation of males and the under-representation of females in those who achieve academic success. (149)

Perhaps the tutee resists tutoring because she has been systematically silenced not only in the academy but in the workplace and in other social situations. A more advanced and successful student, and more closely aligned to those "gentlemen" of the academy, perhaps the tutor has been more successful than other students because somewhere along the way she has adopted a more masculine approach throughout her education.

Research on student resistance provides a new vocabulary for discussing peer tutorial relationships and thus a starting point to reinterpret seemingly defeating and conflicted dialogue within tutorials as instead productive negotiations. Because these conversations occur in the context of an "ecology" of the writer, a student writer comes to peer tutoring with a complicated status. Her story should be told from the viewpoint not only of her specific experiences, but also from the perspective of the impact the institution has on her life. Jacqueline Jones Royster speaks about the "matrix of oppressions" and of a "recurring tension in academic environments" facing African-American women. Biman Basu concurs as she quotes Barbara Smith's "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" which complicates the construction of resistance even further: " . . . The politics of sex as well as race and class are crucially interlocking factors" (Basu 18). A student is seemingly a product of political factors: her race, her gender, her class, but a tutor may be a product of these political factors revised: her privileged status as a white, upper middle class successful student.

Is resistance, as Giroux suggests, a response to domination? How can resistance be indicative of a positive method of negotiating for authority within peer tutorials? In other words, could a student writer establish her authority as a writer *despite* or *because* of her resistance?

Conclusion

In considering this brief review of literature, this attempt to construct an interpretive lens to focus on resistance, I'd like to ask these questions:

(1) What scholars and types of scholarship am I privileging?

(2) What do my choice of "the literature" suggest about my own research design? What do they suggest about the assumptions I have about what peer tutoring is all about? About what constitutes good research?

I believe the answers to these questions reside in the multidisciplinary approach I tentatively took in this review. Good research I'd define as Nancy Grimm suggested: it is research that critiques theories, complicates thinking, and interrogates approaches. I'm not arguing that we digress into what could be a narcissistic meta-analysis of our designs, methodologies, or interpretive lens-making. Instead, I see in my own work and the work I admire a continual reinventing of research in response to the realization of what Anne Gere referred to in her keynote address as the "situational literacy" we observe and want to describe in writing centers.

Eric Hobson argues that writing centers must break away from English departments if they are to have financial flexibility and academic credibility. I believe the impact of this

break will be a positive one for research: We will then become physically and intellectually closer to other disciplines, closer to a truer multi-disciplinary approach to constructing knowledge.

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